

## **OVERCOMING PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE**

Some of the problems with language include:

- \* *Misunderstandings between connotative and denotative meanings.*
- \* *Language tends to be static, yet we live in an ever-changing dynamic world.*
- \* *Facts and inferences are often confused.*
- \* *Language enables us to stereotype people into categories ignoring their individual differences.*
- \* *Two-valued orientations do not permit us to see more than two sides of an issue.*
- \* *We often have signaled responses to words that inhibit us from making anything other than a knee-jerk response.*
- \* *Whenever we communicate we leave out information via our abstractions.*
- \* *The map, or verbal description of the world, rarely is an accurate representation of the territory, the world we perceive.*

With all of these problems with language, it is amazing that we are able to communicate with any success. As the mediator of a dispute, you must make a concentrated effort to make sure that the meanings of the words you hear and use have the same meanings to the disputants. While not a complete panacea, there are several tools the mediator can use to reach the desired goal of shared understanding. For each of the problems with communication discussed, language experts offer us strategies to overcome these problems and to make the most out of the language we use, be it settling a dispute or having an important conversation with our children.

### **1. Feedback and Bypassing**

In the course of mediation, certain words or phrases will arise which may have the same denotative meanings for all involved. On the other hand, connotative meanings of these words may have as many meanings as there are days in the week. The job of the mediator is to use *feedback* and avoid *bypassing*. Bypassing is the assumption that what a word means to you means the same thing to the other person. The mediator must make sure that disputants have shared meanings on points in question.

## **2. Changing Static Language to a Dynamic Process**

To overcome this difficulty, general semantics (people who study the way language affects human behavior) tell us to use the process of “dating”. When we date someone or something, we indicate that by that date that life is a constantly changing process. Dating keeps us aware of the constant transformation of reality. One disputant in a mediation session may try to react to the other disputant as if they never change. To “Person A”, the fact that six months ago “Person B” borrowed his lawn mower and broke it, still means that “Person B” is “irresponsible”. And in fact he still may be irresponsible. But the mediator must remember that the person six months ago is not necessarily the same person sitting across from him in mediation. In other words, “Person B June” does not equal “Person B December”. The mediator must be aware of this and not silently attach static labels to disputants. The fact that people change is what makes mediation possible.

## **3. Separating Facts From Fiction**

As a mediator you must be able to separate fact from fiction, observations from evaluations. This is no easy task. Haney (1967) gives some good suggestions on how to distinguish facts from inferences. Statements of facts can be made only after observation, can be made only by the observer, must approach certainty, and can only be made to the degree of the observer’s capabilities and competency. On the other hand, inferences can be made at anytime, go beyond observation, and can be made by the incompetent.

## **4. Avoid Stereotypes-Recognize Individuality**

When we react to labels we have assigned to groups of people, our stereotypes do not permit us to see individual differences. In order to help us overcome this problem, Korzybski developed the procedure of “indexing”. For each person we see or know, we assign a number. For example, we might have had a bad experience with a policeman at some time in our life, but we remember that Policeman 1 is not the same as Policeman 2. In other words, the index number reminds us that each person is unique even though they may be part of a category of people labeled policemen, firemen, teachers, truckers, etc. The truly effective mediator responds to each person he or she encounters during dispute resolution as a separate entity regardless of their occupation, social status, or appearance. If, in the process of mediation, you hear the disputants responding to each other as stereotypes, you might want to make them aware of the indexing process to deflate dangerous attitudes that are associated with stereotypes.

## **5. Avoid 2-Value and Adopt Multivalued Orientations**

Language can be polarized by dividing reality into two camps: right-wrong, good-bad, etc. Semanticists tell us to adopt a “multivalued orientation” which enables us to see more than two sides of reality. Since life is rarely made up of either-or situations, we may become “increasingly capable of reacting appropriately to the many complex situations life presents by examining the differences of things in degrees, not on a two system” (Hayakawa, p. 207). Think of people, places, and situations as being situated on a ruler. If

you placed “good” at the one-inch mark and “bad” on the twelve-inch mark, you can begin to picture the many degrees or inches of reality separating good and bad. You also can easily see how much information is left out if we only use two orientations. In settling conflicts, your task is to probe this excluded area, finding the middle ground, and more importantly, help the disputants find the gray areas on which they can agree.

## **6. Avoid Signal Knee-Jerk Reactions**

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of language is avoiding knee-jerk signal responses to a certain symbol. It was previously mentioned that midwesterners have an immediate signal response to the word “tornado” much in the same way that southerners react to the word “bitch.” The mediator argues for what she calls “high quality semantic reaction” in which the listener will delay his reactions long enough to analyze the situation as a whole after hearing a word that usually results in a signal reaction.

During dispute resolution, it is the responsibility of the mediator to ask that the disputants to refrain from using slang, obscenities, etc. that might result in a signal response from the other person. In addition, since the use of one of these types of words will sooner or later happen during dispute resolution, the disputants should be told to delay their responses to signal words adapting Sondel’s “high quality semantic reaction” in order to diffuse hostilities and “clear the air”. However, it is the responsibility of the mediator to make clear during the setting of the ground rules that inflammatory language will not be tolerated.

## **7. Information Lost in the Abstracting Process**

The fact that the abstraction process is used by all of us when we describe our world is not always a liability but a necessity. Your responsibility in mediation is to get the disputants to speak in lower-level distractions. Use probing questions to get the meaning of vague, abstract terminology, i.e., “You said that Mr. Cutway was being unfair to you (higher order abstractions, unfair has a variety of interpretations), can you give me some examples that lead you to this conclusion?”

## **8. Getting the Map to Fit the Territory**

In using maps (language) to describe our external environment (territory), we must make constant revisions to make sure that these two are as accurate as possible. According to Peck (1978), the constant revision of our maps--our perceptions of reality--does a great deal to maintain our emotional stability. Disputants will describe many maps to you; it is your responsibility in mediation to ascertain how accurate these maps are with respect to the territory they are describing. Push for clarity, inferences are a good indication that the disputant is giving you a warped description of the territory. Ask for information that can perhaps be corroborated.

Getting an accurate picture of the dispute from the disputants is a difficult process. You must utilize effective listening skills, an understanding of some of the problems of language and how to overcome them, and a knowledge that sometimes people’s descriptions of

reality are distorted. Only then can you see if the map is an accurate description of the territory.

Language, the symbolic process by which humans communicate, has the ability to transfer information among people. However, in our use of language, we have the capability of creating misinformation. Sometimes the sole purpose of communication is to simply avoid being misunderstood. In your role as mediator, you must critically evaluate the information you receive from the disputants, separating facts from inferences, connotative from denotative meanings, stereotypes from reality. It is not an easy task, yet it is essential if we are to use language effectively in the resolution of disputes through mediation.